

BOBBY KERSEY

Summary: Bobby Kersey talks about his career as a boatman, mooring techniques, the process of hiring, and the evolution of communication from whistle signals to FM radio. He also discusses how even though regulations after 9/11 have affected work not much has changed for the boatman.

00:45

Born 6/7/34 in Dangerfield in Northeast Texas. Population then 2000 residents. Left Dangerfield in 1959 and came to Houston. Joined Houston Mooring Company. Had a relative that worked as an owner of the Houston Mooring company. Been with Houston Mooring for 53 years. Competing mooring company called Texas mooring. Worked on the contracting for both companies.

02:10

Boatman takes the mooring line when ship comes into the docks. Runs a mooring boat that takes lines out to the moorings that are out in the water. No other access route. Takes the lines from the ship to the moorings. Ship hauls themselves to the side of the dock while cargo is being loaded. Most of the ships ties are chemical or crude oil tankers. Dangerous. No synthetic ropes to hold ship, crude ships use large cables or wires with a piece of synthetic line on the end of it. Awkward to load onto boat.

Tugs are alongside the ship, help it to maneuver itself into the dock. On the crude ship that are larger, use two boats 3 men in each boat. Put the spring lines first, lower down to boat. Men are on each end of the ship. Men will put out spring lines first. (shows on picture). Spring lines are lowered down to the boat. Pilot will move ship back and forth till he gets the header. Usually, crude ships put 8 lines on each end. 2 boats take either end.

22 foot, inboard aluminum boat with flat deck so someone walking on it can handle ropes and wires. Really strong boats that can pull a lot of weight. Can go 25 miles/hr. Boats watch out for tugboats so that they don't get crushed. At least 4 tugboats have been partially sunk in a time before communications were so advanced.

08:05

Communication. Pilots had to use mouth whistle. That was signal for the tugboats. Captain on tugboat knew which way to go and how fast. Then started using single band radios. Signal gets crowded after sometime but worked better than whistles. And then started using FM radios. Channel 14 or Channel 77. Channel 13 for ship to ship traffic and when they are transferring in and out.

Takes 30-35 minutes to tie a boat. Sometimes 15 mins with fast crews. Can dock 6-8 boats in a day. On call from 5.00 am and usually work till early afternoon. Can do 10-11 jobs in a day.

11:10

Companies did hiring back then and workers fell in place with the rest of rotation. But now it is different. Union picks employees they bring in. Have to start at the very bottom. If just starting out, need to have another job. Active boatmen - 65. not all on call at the same time.

13:45

Company pays even when union hires. Dispatcher keeps note of hours and who is working. Sends that to company. Go by growth tonnage. Straight job is worth up to 15,000 growth tons. From there a job and a half - from there to 45,000. That is considered a double job. Larger ships take a little longer to come in, tie up etc. if big ships have good crews can tie up in 15-20 mins.

9/11 regulations affecting work. used to drive into the refineries and chemical plants and drive right down to the docks and wait for ship to come in. Now, some plants like Shell, have to park way off and catch their jitney and catch a ride to the dock.

17:40

Dispatcher gets jobs from one company and he will dispatch it out to employees. Gang on men tying ship in one location, and work is close by, dispatcher will call and let them know about the next job. Crude tankers use 4 men. Most jobs require only two men. A gang would be two or four people. Crude ships would have 3 men on each boat. Normal working day would move around the whole terminal. Keep going from one end to another.

20:10

Learnt by being under someone's wing. Did not take long to know where the docks were. Shell docks were here but they tied up their own ships then. Tying a ship to the dock is not that difficult a job. process of tying a ship. Difficult thing was learning to run a mooring boat. Second or third year started running the boat. Oldest man is called the header and is Responsible for any activity that needs to be reported. Have taken new comers under wing and help them as much as can. job is dangerous and any help is appreciated.

27:00

Older ships that are more dangerous. Years ago, better quality of seamen. Maintained ship better, knew how to handle the lines better. Japanese, Norwegians and Swedes were the most efficient. Knew how to handle the job. Don't see them that much anymore. Can find cheaper seamen in the Philippines, Oriental countries. Most seamen come from there. American flag ships are almost non existent.

Better mooring facilities. Years ago, when tankers were put on sale, used big round steel pilings, mooring up on top of it. Had to climb these things and secure from there. Now, terminals have hooks to put big cables, so cables hang down to boat level. Have better and faster boats and placed in more strategic locations

30:45

Boats belong to the company and they maintain them. Keep them fueled. Have mechanics. That is convenient. Then, had to gas the boat ourselves and maintain them. Boats are bigger by a small margin. Lighter, stronger and faster. Engines that are used now are diesel engines and more reliable than gasoline engines.

33:30

Own meeting separate from the ILA. Monthly Union meeting and safety meetings. Each company has their own rep. Coast guard has their own rep at the safety meetings. Life vest, hard hats, safety shoes, gloves have to be worn at the docks and in the boat.

Gear - extra rope in the boat, Lines from a ship that are leading. three quarter inch called a messenger, horn, fire extinguishers. radio. Pretty well equipped with all necessities.

Ropes with different names. Wires, mostly on the crude ships, section at the end of the wire. range usually from 25-35 ft long mostly for shock absorbers. Called Combinations.

Knots (demonstrates) Bowling knot is the most common and Timber Hitch.

40:30

Wanted to take the training and schooling to get license to become a pilot. Take freshwater boat out occasionally. Son would work weekends and summers starting from when he was 16. Good tugboat operator. Sometimes work the same shift together. Had to work middle of the night when starting out. Had to be on call around the clock. More ships coming in at night.

Strikes. Boatman honored picket lines during strikes. Sometimes ship crews had to get down and tie themselves up. Strike in the 60s was the only time layoffs happened. Non union boatmen were there for a while.

50:00

Not too many dramatic changes for boatmen. There is no way around putting line out for boats alongside. Barges do construction the docks. Crane on barge that lifts pipe up and drop the spuds. This hold the barge up to perfect position. Put up mooring lines like they do now. lot of changes but the way lines are put out there has been little change.

Used to have more flexibility with going aboard ships. Used to meet a lot of people both local and foreign. Mostly operate crude or chemical ships and come in contact with workers who connect and disconnect the hoses, the pilots and the tugboat operators.

Enjoyed a lot of aspects of the job.